

LESOTHO 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

The government removed all COVID-19 restrictions on August 22, and normal religious services resumed. A Muslim religious leader noted Christian groups had comparatively greater access to state media for the propagation of religious beliefs. The government continued to provide extensive support for schools operated by religious groups, including paying and certifying all teachers.

The Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), an umbrella organization representing the Roman Catholic, Assemblies of God, African Methodist Episcopal, Anglican Church of Lesotho, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Lesotho Evangelical Church in Southern Africa, and a student Christian movement, stated it involved various faith-based organizations, including non-Christian groups, in its activities. In October, the CCL invited leaders from the 65 political parties registered with the Independent Electoral Commission to sign a pledge committing themselves to peaceful, free, and fair National Assembly elections on October 7. The CCL also cited increasing concern among religious leaders regarding crime in the country, noting that it affected their members even if specific religious groups were not targeted. The CCL also expressed concern about the involvement of some newer Pentecostal churches in criminal activities.

During the year, the U.S. Ambassador met with government and religious leaders to discuss religious tolerance and their plans to help keep the peace during and after the National Assembly elections in October.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.2 million (midyear 2022). According to the CCL, approximately 90 percent of the population is Christian. An

Afrobarometer survey in February-March estimated the Christian segment of the population to be more than 95 percent. The survey found that Protestants, including Anglicans, evangelical Christians, Methodists, members of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Pentecostals, Christian Zionists, Baptists, and members of the Church of Christ, represent 53.7 percent of the population, and Roman Catholics, 41.4 percent. The country's other citizens and residents include Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, those who belong to Indigenous or other religious groups, and nonbelievers. Many Christians practice traditional Indigenous rituals in conjunction with Christianity. According to Afrobarometer, Muslims constitute 0.4 percent of the population. Muslims live primarily in the northern area of the country and in the capital.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of conscience, thought, and religion, including the freedom to change religion or belief and to manifest and propagate one's religion. These rights may be limited by laws in the interests of defense, public safety, order, morality, or protecting the rights of other persons, provided the limitations are the minimum necessary.

The law requires religious marriages to be performed by members of the clergy, leaving adherents of religious traditions without a clergy, such as Baha'is, with civil marriage as their only option. The law also recognizes marriage under Lesotho customary law based on Basotho cultural norms and practices.

By law, any group, religious or otherwise, may register as a legal entity with the government, providing the entity has a constitution and a leadership committee. Most religious groups register, but there is no penalty for those that do not. Registration gives a group legal standing, formalizes its structure under the law, and provides exemption from income tax. In the absence of registration, religious organizations may operate freely, but without legal standing or any of the protections of registered organizations.

The Ministry of Education pays and certifies all teachers at government-funded schools, including religious schools, and requires a standard curriculum for both

secular and religious schools. The government permits but does not mandate religious education in schools, and the constitution exempts students at any educational institution from requirements to receive instruction or attend any ceremony or observance associated with a religion that is not their own. The Minister of Education must approve all curricula, including for religious education classes. The law does not prohibit or restrict schools run by religious organizations. Other than the constitutional provision barring discrimination, there is no specific law requiring religious schools to accept children not of the school's denomination.

The country is party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On August 22, the government removed all COVID-19 restrictions, and normal religious services resumed. In 2021, some Christian and Muslim groups had stated that a lack of government consultation in establishing COVID-19-related restrictions on the permitted number of worshippers and the duration of religious events had affected their religious practices and complicated modifying those guidelines as circumstances changed.

A Muslim religious leader continued to say Muslims had no access to state-owned television religious programming opportunities available to Christian groups, which left Muslims unable to propagate their religion through this medium.

Churches continued to own and operate 83 percent of all primary and 66 percent of all secondary schools. The Roman Catholic Church, Lesotho Evangelical Church, Anglican Church, and, to a lesser extent, Methodist Church were the primary operators of these religious schools, which were publicly funded.

In practice, religious education – including in all religious schools and in some secular schools – was mandatory, according to parents and teachers. Despite the constitutional provisions allowing students to opt out of religious education, there were no reports of students electing to do so.

The government continued to permit families to send their children to schools run by religious groups other than their own, and some families chose this option. Others went to public schools or secular private schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to local media, on May 12, Bishop David Thakadu Ramela of the St. Paul African Apostolic Church mediated a meeting between the leader of the then-ruling All Basotho Convention party, Nkaku Kabi, and then Prime Minister Moeketsi Majoro, to broker unity within the party ahead of the October National Assembly elections.

The Christian Council of Lesotho (CCL), an umbrella organization representing the Roman Catholic, Assemblies of God, African Methodist Episcopal, Anglican Church of Lesotho, Methodist Church of Southern Africa, Lesotho Evangelical Church in Southern Africa, and a student Christian movement, stated it involved various faith-based organizations, including non-Christian groups, in its activities.

On July 17, CCL leaders included a Muslim representative and those from other religious groups in a service that marked the King's birthday and offered prayers for peaceful National Assembly elections. The CCL also invited other faith-based organizations to take part in a meeting held in August on the occasion of the presentation of the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution to the public. CCL leaders said the amendment, which would enable reforms in all branches of the government, in government management of the economy, and in government relations with the media, was necessary to stabilize the government. On October 5, the CCL invited leaders from the 65 political parties registered with the Independent Electoral Commission to sign a pledge committing themselves to peaceful, free, and fair National Assembly elections on October 7; 25 political party leaders or their representatives did so. The pledge also committed party leaders to respect human dignity, ban physical and verbal violence, denounce discrimination based on gender, physical appearance or religion, condemn hate speech, avoid acts of criminality, and accept and respect the final election results. The elections were declared free and fair, and all political parties accepted the outcome, even those who did not sign the pledge.

The CCL continued to express the concern of religious leaders about crime in the country, which it said was based on anger due to a lack of opportunity for youth, aggressive gang activity, and gender-based violence. The CCL noted crime affected their members, even if not specifically targeted at a religious group, and stated that churches should play a larger role in addressing societal issues. The CCL stated that some of what it described as newer, “mushrooming,” Pentecostal churches registered as faith-based organizations were engaged in criminal activities such as trafficking in persons, sexual harassment, abuse, and money laundering. For example, on May 6, the Berea Magistrate Court sentenced Pastor Thukulula Smith to 50 years in prison on two counts of human trafficking and two counts of rape. He was found guilty of using his position as a pastor in 2018 to gain the trust of his congregants to transport two teenagers to South Africa to secure jobs, but he assaulted them instead. He has been in jail since 2018.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, the U.S. Ambassador met with then Minister of Police and Public Safety Lepota Sekola to discuss religious tolerance and plans to help keep peace during and after the October 7 National Assembly elections. On September 14, the Ambassador met with CCL chairperson Bishop Daniel Rantle and the CCL board of trustees to discuss religious freedom in the country and the CCL’s plans to support the elections. On September 20, the Ambassador met with Archbishop of Maseru Gerard Tlali Lerotholi, who echoed the CCL’s commitment to support the political party’s peace pledge ahead of elections. The U.S. embassy used its social media platforms during the year to highlight religious freedom issues.